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## THE TEACHING OF FRENCH PRONUNCIATION BY THE USE OF PHONETIC SYMBOLS

In all the work we do in languages, ancient and modern, I suppose there is no difficulty more serious than that of French pronunciation. The only way to conquer a difficulty is to face it squarely. How shall we approach this one?

The matter of pronunciation is surely one of vital importance. Without proper attention to it, our whole modern method of language teaching falls to the ground. If the pronunciation of the pupils is bad, what earthly use is oral work? It is a farce; is it not?

Suppose you are in a classroom in France or Germany where English is being taught. The teacher tells a story in English with excellent pronunciation and then questions the class. What would you think if the pupils were to answer in the Yorkshire dialect or with a Cockney accent and the teacher did not object? It would be odd as a sample of oral work, would it not? But would it be any worse than many glaring and uncorrected mispronunciations of French in classes where the teacher pronounces well?

What redeems oral work from being a farce is that those who believe in it and who can do it successfully are usually agreed on the importance of correct pronunciation, and are trained to give it to their pupils.

The pronunciation of Greek and Latin, Italian and Spanish, and German can be learned easily enough. A few directions and a little practice can make the work of beginners correct for, in the main, they *say* what they *see*. And when they begin to pronounce French, the method is reversed. What they see is what they do not say! Is not the best plan to place before beginners and before all who pronounce badly the very sounds they are to say? Shall we not teach them how to say them correctly, shall we not give them sufficient practice so that they will recognize these sounds the moment they are heard? The method is so very simple and such an economy of time. May I not outline it for you?

Each sound is taught by the correct pronunciation of a word containing it, a word in which it is easy to pronounce that sound correctly. For instance, in the very first lesson the words *lit*,

nez, met, table are pronounced first by teacher, then by class in concert. Then they are written on the board and beside them in brackets the sounds they illustrate (i), (e), (e), (a). The pupils are told that these are key-words—they must connect each with the corresponding sound. When there is any difficulty in pronouncing the sound in other words (there often is), they should pronounce the key-word, get the sound correctly and apply it to the new difficult word. For instance, they learn to say *une*, representing the sound (y). Any one can say “*une*” correctly. Many can copy it directly from the teacher. Others need to say (i) and round lips quickly. We do this in concert. All get it with little difficulty. Then we practise the list of words containing this sound, saying “*une*” before each. The list begins *dur, rue, plume, juste, jupe*. We say, *une, dur; une, rue; une, plume, etc.* This works admirably with any difficult sound. Every such sound has its own list for practice. The result is that later the class pronounces best the hardest sounds and recognizes them most rapidly. Every lesson begins with a complete review of all sound work taught. All sounds learned are dictated. In about six lessons of fifteen minutes each, the pupil knows the sounds of French and can write them from dictation. No English sounds are given as a guide unless they are exact equivalents. Nor are like sounds compared until they have become distinct by practice.

After the sounds have been taught, the phonetic text is opened. The teacher pronounces the sounds, then the word, the class repeating. After a few words, the class readily pronounces the word correctly, the separate sounds having been correctly pronounced. The lines read one day are reviewed the next. After a few pages have been gone over in this way, the teacher assigns as home work a page of regular text, corresponding to the phonetic text already prepared. The pupils are to compare one text with the other, line by line, pronouncing aloud first from the phonetic transcription and then from the regular spelling. That first page of French text has been pronounced with only one bad mistake—the (y) in *mur*—on the very first day that the regular text was opened in class. Extraordinary success is the reward of students who listen carefully, who practise aloud faithfully at home and who are prompt in asking for help. The rapid improvement in their pronunciation is little short of marvellous.

Their pleasure in it is a fresh incentive to diligent practice. On that all success depends.

Why is it that so often when a teacher pronounces excellently, half the class may pronounce almost as well as the teacher, a quarter rather badly, and the rest very badly indeed? Why does the teacher allow such a state of affairs? Does he not notice it? I can hardly think so. Does he not think pronunciation of importance? I can hardly believe it. Is he hopeless about improving the pronunciation of those who murder the language? When a teacher has been phonetically trained and trains his pupils phonetically he is never hopeless and that submerged quarter of the class pronounces decently at least. The pupils make mistakes, give the wrong nasal sound, but the sounds they utter are French sounds.

The truth of what I say has been proved over and over again. Prove it for yourselves anywhere. Listen to the French classes in any High School. Compare the pronunciation of pupils whose teachers have done practical work in French phonetics, with the pronunciation of other pupils whose teachers pronounce well but do not understand or use phonetic symbols. There is, there will be, and can be only one answer. However well the teacher pronounces without a knowledge of phonetics, half or one-third of her class pronounces badly and has no apparent hope of improvement for these bad pronunciations occur in second and third year classes. Such a teacher says that she does not believe in phonetics and depends on imitation. Imitation? Of course, we learn to speak by imitation! There is no other way. Why the French baby before he says a word is rounding his lips there in his cradle. He is imitating the mouths around him, And the British baby's little mouth is almost a straight line. He is imitating what he sees too just as perfectly as the French baby. They are Allies you know. Of course we learn to pronounce by imitation. What use could a singer make of his printed notes if he had never heard them sung? What use could a violinist make of his score if he had never heard the notes played?

If notes, *the phonetic symbols of music*, are useless to the singer, the pianist, the violinist, unless he has heard them sung or played, how can a student read from the sounds of French unless he has

heard them correctly pronounced? Of course, we teach our pupils to pronounce by imitation. The question is not whether we shall work by imitation but whether that imitation shall be definite, precise, and constant. Those who argue against the use of phonetic symbols should object to the use of printed music. Printed notes have exactly the same relation to the voice or to the musical instrument that the written sounds have to pronunciation. Shall a music student do definite and useful home work in practising from printed music the exercises set by the teacher; or shall he try to imitate the teacher in class and do nothing out of class? Shall the student of French pronunciation be deprived of the swiftest, surest, and most interesting method of attaining his object? Shall we not give him the tools that he can use and use effectually the moment he can pronounce the sounds?

After five or six lessons the student can practise his pronunciation at home from the phonetic text. He can and he will—for this method wins at once the pupils interest and willing effort. The results of such work are wonderful—the most encouraging phenomenon in the history of teaching. Many pupils who have never before heard a French word will read correctly from the phonetic text at the seventh French lesson. The lazy student is instantly detected. If he cannot pronounce well in class from the phonetic text assigned for home work, he has not practised aloud. The whole class knows that. For phonetic work not only sharpens the ear of the teacher, but trains the ears of the class and develops their critical faculty to an extraordinary degree.

They say that foreign language work is impossible for older students. I have never seen any reason to believe it. You know Cato learned Greek at eighty. In almost every class of students of any age about two per cent. are sound deaf and language dumb. *Those* I firmly believe are the people who when older are dull in language work. Some of the very best phonetic work is done by men and women of from thirty to forty-five years of age, and older who have never studied a foreign language, who have never had musical training.

It is the old story, you know: the dear old doctrine of interest and desire, the fine capacity, according to Kitchener the *American* capacity for lifting yourself very well indeed by your boot straps. There is no rule ever made by psychologists that such students

do not break—to the delight of the teacher and the vast admiration of the class.

It is *not* necessary for pupils to spend weeks reading from phonetic transcriptions before they see the French text. Reading aloud from the phonetic text goes hand in hand with reading from the corresponding French text. They do *not* confuse sounds and letters. A few words of explanation suffice. In two years' work with as many as seventy-five beginners each year, I have had only two cases of confusing the phonetic spelling of a word with its ordinary spelling. Perhaps the reason for this complete lack of confusion is my belief that pupils need not write whole sentences or even whole words in phonetic characters. The phonetic text is distinctly intended for the eyes, not for the fingers. From it they learn how to pronounce the regular text. It is useful just for pronunciation. What *is* very important for successful work is constant practice in placing the correct symbol over the hard part of difficult words. For instance, a list of words containing nasal sounds is put on the board. The pupils place the correct symbol over each nasal sound. Then the words are read in concert and by individuals. Or a number of typewritten questions are passed and answered rapidly either orally or in writing: What is the first sound in *guide*, *aura*, *ainsi*: the last in *fille*, *nous*, *neuf*, *faim*, *monsieur*: the second in *jeune*, *tête*, *cocher*, etc. Such a drill is excellent for review; it can be done with amazing rapidity and is welcomed by the class—there is no part of the work that arouses their enthusiastic interest more than this work in sounds. They are anxious to pronounce well even when their real object in studying French is a reading knowledge.

It is idle to dispute about the value of phonetics with those who have never studied the subject practically. "A little learning is a dangerous thing." A violent opponent of phonetics said to me once, "I have read book after book on phonetics and I don't believe in them." "If you have read all the books printed," I answered, "you have done just one-seventh of the work. The other six-sevenths consists in listening to someone who can say the sounds correctly. You must practice until you can say them." He was rather surprised for he was quite proud of his knowledge of phonetics and he happened to pronounce rather badly.

What are the facts? The important and difficult part is to pronounce excellently. I have often heard it said that native French teachers do not need phonetics. But their *pupils* do. Such teachers can learn in three or four hours how to apply their good pronunciation to the advantage of their pupils. All that is necessary is to connect the sounds they say with the symbols we use and to learn the easiest way to train their pupils to imitate them. These symbols are not arbitrary symbols: they are not Egyptian hieroglyphics. They represent the sounds uttered by one who pronounces well and who perhaps has never heard of the science of phonetics.

Pupils who have not been trained to pronounce French correctly blame their first teacher. It is much easier to train a beginner to pronounce with fair correctness than to improve the false sounds of the pupil who pronounces badly. If we would spare ourselves the condemnation of our pupils—and would one of us willingly deserve it?—we must be sure that the sounds of our beginners are correct. There is a charm in teaching first year French for anyone who loves to teach. It is the everlasting charm of the beginnings of things and of weakness depending on strength. For in this matter of pronunciation our pupils are absolutely dependent on us—on the correctness of our own sounds, on the carefulness with which we listen to theirs, on the skill with which we improve them, on our interest in having them pronounce well, on our hopefulness in the success of our labors. An adequate preparation, carefulness, skill, interest, hope—what ever resisted them successfully? Who ever taught well without them?

ANNA WOODS BALLARD.

Teachers College, Columbia University.